

Tennessee Is Truly the “Volunteer State”

by Jason Levkulich

Known as the Volunteer State, Tennessee is used to seeing its sons and daughters stepping in to make a difference. Whether in peace or war, the state has been well represented. This time, the emphasis is on peace and love.

Everyone needs love. It's been known to heal wounds and bring out the best in even the worst person. It really can be the answer. And, if that's "all you need," then it's not surprising that when attention and care are given it can make a difference.

And, making a difference appears to be the goal for the thousands of volunteers throughout Tennessee. Helping in and amongst hospitals, care centers and state-run facilities, these people bring a fervid desire to enriching others' lives.

Whether it's cutting and styling service recipients' hair or collecting clothing for those in need or simply planting flowers to brighten someone's day, these acts of kindness bring joy into the hearts of many in state-run facilities. Most of the time, these acts bring no recognition, no reward except personal satisfaction.

Dr. Henry Meece, chief officer at Greene Valley Developmental Center, believes that the role of volunteers is "vitally important" to the ongoing success of any facility.

"All people need friends and that is why volunteers are so important," Meece said. "They typically begin their volunteer experience by providing a service to an individual living in a facility. Often times their role evolves from volunteer to friend and they develop a very lasting and meaningful relationship that is just as beneficial to the volunteer as it is to the individual."

One such volunteer is Gloria Dessart.

After her last of five children entered first grade, Dessart told herself she needed to keep busy. So, she decided to volunteer at a local children's hospital. From then on she's never looked back.

In 1962, she founded the music program at, then, Eastern State Hospital. But, it's at Lakeshore Mental Health Institute (the facility's current name) that Dessart has done the bulk of her work.

She recognized the need for a freestanding volunteer auxiliary at Lakeshore and in 1984 founded and was a charter member of "Friends of Lakeshore, Inc."



Love is All You Really Need: Gloria Dessart hugs one of her friends at Lakeshore Mental Health Institute.

"From parties and contests each month to lighting Christmas trees, we try to make life better for the service recipients," she said.

In 1988, she began her role as an advocate with the homeless by serving at the Refuge for the Volunteer Ministry Center.

"All people need friends and that is why volunteers are so important."
— Gloria Dessart

"Advocacy is very important to me," Dessart said. "I'm out every day. It's a life."



Dessart, who will turn 74 in September, said that the time has flown by.

"I don't feel old," she said. "I've learned so much."

She's also served on many boards and coalitions through the years. And, she still assists in mental health sensitivity training with several agencies.

Dessart has also been recognized, in the past, by several groups for her charitable work.

The list includes:

- President Bush's "1,000 Point of Light" program, June 1992
- Statewide Volunteer of the Year for the Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities, 1991
- J.C. Penney "Golden Rule Award," 1988
- Lakeshore "True Friend" award, 1996
- Jefferson Award (for community service), June 2000

Through the years, Dessart has been innovative and enthusiastic as an advocate for the mentally ill and homeless. She has sought to make a difference on her long journey. And, with the programs and help she has started and given, it is apparent that she has made a difference.

"If I need to be remembered for something I'd rather it be that I treated people as human beings and was able to become their friend," Dessart said.

Many times, those in need are forgotten. They often end up passed over or become mere afterthoughts. Maybe they have no friends or family. Maybe, their families place them out of sight, out of mind. Those who take an active role often dedicate countless hours in trying to enrich the people's lives they come in contact with.

Last year, Tennesseans spent 30,000 hours of their time volunteering for the DMHDD. Many are groups banded together in hopes of making a difference. One such group, the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, is founded upon that notion.

College...the word, alone, invokes various memories for people all over the earth.

For some it might be sitting up late night studying for exams or cheering the football team to victory (if one was lucky enough to have a good sports program). Others might think of graduation and receiving that piece of paper that stated "here's an educated person." And, for others, it's memories of the Greek system that filled free time with functions, fundraisers and fun.

All in all, for most people it's a good time. It's a time of exploration. A time many of us spend searching out who we are. It's a time for making friends and possibly finding that certain someone.

For one particular group of ladies, it's a time that ties them together forever. A tie bound in sisterhood. And, with one goal keeping them in unison for the rest of their lives.



Founded in 1913, the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority was envisioned to be a group of college trained, black women whose purpose was to promote human welfare.

Over the years, this ideal has been kept alive not only by active members, but by alumnae chapters as well.

The Memphis Alumnae Chapter has been living up to that ideal by staying involved within their community since 1935.

The 300 active members (900 total members) keep busy with a flurry of activities centered on those less fortunate. Chapter President Bettye Coe Donahue said that volunteer work is something that shouldn't be taken lightly.



Top: Julia Dessart works long hours sorting clothes for one of the many clothes drives she participates in each year.

Middle: High Pointe Nursing Home patient, Mrs. Davis, with Delta Sigma Theta members.

Above: Delta Sigma Theta Sorority members (and a few of their children) at the finish line of the "Alzheimer's Association Memory Walk" held October 1999 at the Memphis Zoo.

“We are a public service sorority that feels that those in need must be taken care of,” Donahue said. “Everyone must make a difference.”

Assisting with the Memphis Mental Health Institute, the chapter provides a variety of services throughout the year. Operating a “clothes closet,” the ladies gather clothes from the community to help fulfill service recipients’ needs. Whenever something is asked for, they simply have to “open the closet” and take what is needed. Monetary gifts for more specific clothing needs and one time purchases (women’s undergarments) are also not uncommon.

But, they just don’t stop at clothes. Members work in their library where countless donated books, games and videos are available for people to enjoy. Scholarships for high school students, AIDS awareness programs and general goodwill are also high on their list each year.

“We hand out gift bags in the women’s wing each year,” Donahue said. “Our Christmas parties are always full of song and lots of fun.”

The sorority also spends much of its time at the High Pointe Nursing Home in Memphis.

“We’ve ‘adopted’ the patients on the third floor (20-35 patients),” Donahue said. “We visit them on the third Saturday of each month (except July and August when the sorority does not meet) and distribute gift bags of personal hygiene items.” Christmas programs round out the year at the home as well. Visits by Santa and the sorority choir headline the festivities.

Not forgetting the children of the community, Delta Sigma Theta prepares Easter baskets for those at the Porter-Leath Children’s Home. The ladies also give an annual monetary donation to the Foster Grandparents’ Program there as well.

The group’s community involvement touches many more lives throughout Memphis. Lives that would probably go unnoticed if it were not for the acts of these sympathetic ladies.

“College women should make a contribution to society,” Donahue said. “We would appreciate more sisters coming out and joining us.”

But why wait till one is in college. Many of the nation’s children offer their free time to volunteer. And, often, their actions continue on into adulthood. How do they view their efforts of aiding the needy, the less fortunate. What are their thoughts on improving situations?

For Holly McAmis, a 13-year-old from Greeneville, Tenn., volunteering in her community is an important part of her life. It is said “out of the mouths of babes...”

I am 13 years old and in the 8th grade at DeBusk Elementary School. I have been very active in volunteer service for the past four years.



At the age of 9, I spent time each week working with adults who are mentally challenged at Greene Valley Developmental Center in Greeneville and volunteering with Special Olympics.

The first time I went to Greene Valley, I was simply scared to death! But, with each passing week, my doubts and fears faded as I began to consider these very special people my friends. I have grown to love, respect and admire their courage and determination. I have learned many valuable lessons through my volunteering, lessons that I know I would have never learned from school, family or TV.

At age 10, I founded a youth service organization at my school called the “Care Bears,” which dedicated itself to two community service projects per month. This organization had a total participation of 18 children, ages 9-14, and stayed very active for over two years.

Unfortunately, a change of schools has not allowed me the time to organize a new group yet. But, it is definitely in the planning stage. Also, my current schedule hasn’t allowed me the time to volunteer as much as before but, I still try very hard



Left: Holly McAmis hands a gift to Annette Brewster at a Christmas party in Greenwood Cottage on Greene Valley's campus. Also helping is Jessica Smith, a practicum student from Tusculum College in Greeneville.

Currently, I'm working hard to launch a new program. It'll be a unified sports league in my community. These days, many children don't think of participating on an organized sports team as anything special, but for a child who is physically or mentally challenged, it is a dream. A dream that I would like to help become a reality.

Do I find time to play and just be a kid? The answer is "YES." I play varsity basketball, softball and volleyball for my school and constantly talk on the phone (which my mother says has grown to my ear). I also maintain a 4.0 grade point average and participate in enrichment classes off campus once a week.

Volunteering isn't something that should be rewarded with a trophy or a plaque. I'm a firm believer that while helping others, we are helping ourselves, because whatever good we give out completes a circle and comes right back to us.

So, I guess what I'm trying to say is that my biggest reward/award has been the blessings and love that I have received from the people that I've helped, along with the friendships that I have formed with all of them.

What would I like to be remembered for? I once read a quote that said, "What we do for ourselves dies with us, but what we do for others and the world remains and is immortal."

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The Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities (DMHDD) realized the important role being played by such people and, in 1990, began annually recognizing top volunteers throughout the state.

So it seems, from Memphis to Knoxville, Nashville to Chattanooga, volunteers do play a vital role in the daily care of many Tennesseans. The phrase "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is more than lip service for these people. Theirs is a desire to make a difference. And they do.

to promote youth service by giving speeches at local civic meetings and schools.

Many people think that they don't have any special talents to offer, or they are too young or too old to do anything for someone else. I simply tell them from my own experiences, that one person (regardless of age or talent) can definitely make a tremendous difference to someone who needs a little help. We all have unique abilities and a special purpose. When I spend time at Greene Valley, whether it's brushing someone's hair, reading a story or simply being there to listen, I know a difference has been made and that is such a rewarding feeling.

Special Olympics is also very important to me. I organize and host an annual Walk-A-Thon to raise money for them. This has been very successful and over the past two years we've been able to contribute over \$2500. This year I talked my school and one other school in my community into allowing me to host a "Hats On For Special Olympics" week. All the students were allowed to wear a hat to school each day to show support for Special Olympics. It was amazing to see just how many kids didn't even know what the Special Olympics is.

Tomorrow Never Knows



Alzheimer's Disease: The Unknown Thief

by Jason Levkulich

Imagine a world where you know no one. You wake every morning in a strange bed, in a strange house. You meet people who speak to you as if they've known you for years. They keep asking questions about events you have no recollection of. Setting off to explore the house you're continually interrupted by the people. They keep talking to you as if they were related. Related? Wouldn't you know your own daughter or family? What silly people.

A dream? If only it were. For many older individuals throughout the world, this sense very well might be an every day occurrence. Much like a bad TV episode that keeps being aired. Unfortunately, it can't be turned off.

Alzheimer's disease is a progressive, neurological disorder that affects an estimated five million American adults. A degenerative disease that attacks the brain resulting in impaired memory, thinking and behavior, Alzheimer's disease (AD) is found in 10 percent of the over 65 years of age population. This figure rises to 50 percent in those over the age of 85. It is the most common form of dementia (a loss of intellectual function so severe that it interferes with an individual's daily functioning). Choosing no sides, AD affects men and women almost equally and eventually results in death.*

Currently, the exact causes of AD are unknown. But research and intensive scientific investigation is underway throughout the nation. Suspected causes include diseased genes, genetic predispositions, abnormal protein build-up in the brain and possible environmental toxins. Some people may carry the genes for the disease, but require a trigger, such as stroke, head trauma or clogged arteries to start AD in motion.

Thomas Montine, M.D., Ph.D. at the Vanderbilt University Medical College Department of Pathology is currently one of a handful of Tennessee doctors researching the disease. He has accumulated evidence that "strongly implicates" oxidative damage to the brain beyond what occurs with aging.

"Our laboratory recently has demonstrated that lipoproteins in AD brain extracellular fluid are more vulnerable to oxidation than

lipoproteins in control brain extracellular fluid," Montine reported in his findings. "Oxidative damage results when oxidative stress exceeds the anti-oxidant capacity of tissue. While several different classes of molecules may be affected, lipid peroxidation is thought to be prominent and especially deleterious form of oxidative damage in the brain because of this organ's relative enrichment in polyunsaturated fatty acids."

Montine has been pursuing his research in a combined effort with fellow researcher Casey Bassett, Ph.D., assistant professor from the University of Montevallo Department of Biology, Chemistry and Mathematics (located in Alabama). They have been collaborating on AD research for the past five years.

Montine and Bassett have concluded that another pathogenic step most likely involved in Alzheimer's disease (along with lipid peroxidation) is lipoprotein trafficking. Fundamental differences

have been reported in the CSF lipoproteins of AD patients compared to controls in both their lipid composition as well as apolipoprotein constituents. The oxidized CSF lipoproteins are neurotoxic and may contribute to neurodegeneration in AD patients. Inheritance of APOE4 (an allele, which is an alternative form of a gene that may occur at any given locus within a chromosome) is associated with an increased risk of late-onset familial and sporadic AD.

"Alzheimer's is a very common disease that robs the end of life from those who have it."
— Tom Montine M.D., Ph.D.

Though much has been discovered, Montine believes his work is far from over.

"Learning how AD happens will be the critical step in the rational design of therapeutics," Montine said. "Our next step is pursuing the molecular mechanisms that control oxidative damage to the brain in AD so we can discover new sites for drugs to act to block disease progression."

Until effective therapy or prevention is discovered, the disease continues to weigh heavily on the minds of many people. Not only are families and individuals having to take care of parents and grandparents, but the thought of one day being incapacitated by the disease itself has sent many running to their doctors with questions, seeking preventative measures.

Even though it is to our benefit to seek out answers and preventative steps, insuring our good health, we shouldn't let it consume our lives. The more one frets over the disease, the more one is open to other mental illnesses such as depression.

The quality of one's life should increase as one ages says William Petrie, M.D., medical director of the geriatric floor at Parthenon Pavilion and member of Psychiatric Consultants in Nashville.

"One should not become preoccupied with death or other illnesses associated with old age," Petrie said. "We can continue to educate ourselves, but don't let it consume our very being."

The burden of being a caregiver is great. Fortunately, today, there are support groups whose sole purpose is to help relieve the pressures of dealing with Alzheimer's disease. These groups, affiliated with the Alzheimer's Association, hospitals and other community assistance centers, can be found throughout the country. They can help you plan (or point you in the right direction) for the continued care of your loved one with information pertaining to legal matters and financial and medical planning. They're also there for those who want to talk about the frustrations and problems related to their new role in life.

The Alzheimer's Association lists some warning signs of caregiver stress. Some of these are: depression, anger, exhaustion, denial, anxiety, irritability, social withdrawal, lack of concentration, sleeplessness and other health problems. If you or someone you know exhibits these signs, in the role as caregiver, please seek out a support group or at least a friend.

The way that Alzheimer's disease robs us of our loved ones is a fact that millions of Americans (let alone the populations of the world) must endure on a daily basis. While we anguish at the sight of those we care about slowly losing touch with reality, we must continue to educate ourselves and provide support for others. The disease has proven that it will not go away on its own. And with continued research, such as Dr. Tom Montine's, an answer might be found.

"Alzheimer's is a very common disease that robs the end of life from those who have it. It is a prolonged devastation for those who love the person with AD," said Montine. "When I started, there were all sorts of ideas of how the disease happened, but no effective prevention or therapy was available. Those are our goals for the future."



For more information, access the Alzheimer's Association web page at: www.alz.org or the Alzheimer's Association Middle Tennessee Chapter at: www.alztn.org

10 Warning Signs

1. Recent Memory Loss That Affects Job Performance

It's normal to occasionally forget things, but remember them later. Those with AD may forget things more often and not remember them later. They may repeatedly ask the same question, not remembering the answer or that they already asked the question.

2. Difficulty Performing Familiar Tasks

Busy people can be distracted from time to time and leave the carrots on the stove, only remembering to serve them at the end of the meal. People with Alzheimer's disease could prepare a meal, forget to serve it, and even forget they made it.

3. Problems with Language

Everyone has trouble finding the right word sometimes, but can finish the sentence with another appropriate word. A person with Alzheimer's disease may forget simple words, or substitute inappropriate words, making their sentence incomprehensible.

4. Disorientation of Time and Place

It's normal to forget the day of the week or your destination for a moment. But people with Alzheimer's disease can become lost on their own street or in a familiar shopping mall, not knowing where they are, how they got there or how to get home.

5. Poor or Decreased Judgment

People can become so immersed in an activity or telephone conversation they temporarily forget the child they're watching. A person with Alzheimer's disease could entirely forget the child under his or her care and leave the house to visit a neighbor.

6. Problems with Abstract Thinking

People who normally balance their checkbooks may be momentarily disconcerted when the task is more complicated than usual, but will eventually figure out the solution. Someone with Alzheimer's disease could forget completely what the numbers are.

7. Misplacing Things

Anyone can misplace a wallet or keys, but eventually find them by reconstructing where they could have been left. A person with Alzheimer's disease may put things down in inappropriate places, an iron in the freezer or a wristwatch in the sugar bowl.

8. Changes in Mood or Behavior

Everyone has a bad day once in a while, or may become sad or moody from time to time. Someone with Alzheimer's disease can exhibit rapid mood swings for no apparent reason, e.g. from calm to tears to anger to calm in a few minutes.

9. Changes in Personality

People's personalities ordinarily change somewhat at different ages, as character traits strengthen or mellow. But a person with Alzheimer's disease can change drastically, becoming extremely irritable, suspicious or fearful.

10. Loss of Initiative

It's normal to tire of housework, business activities or social obligations, but most people regain their initiative. The person with Alzheimer's disease may become very passive and require cues and prompting to get him or her involved in activities.

* Information provided by the Alzheimer's Association Middle Tennessee Chapter.